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Leveraging Social Media to Support a Library Levy Campaign

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In November 2015, voters in Washington County, Oregon, approved a 5-year replacement levy to support countywide library services (Measure 34-235), with 64 percent voting in favor of the measure. As a unique partnership between our county, nine municipalities, and two nonprofit organizations, Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS) organized a successful levy education effort specifically for social media for its twelve member libraries. With the passing of Measure 34-235, WCCLS member libraries are now positioned to continue providing the best possible library service to our patrons for the next five years.

About WCCLS

Our model for public library service in Washington County, Oregon, is unique, to say the least. Ranging from a few small town public libraries serving rural areas, to libraries within densely populated suburban areas on the very edge of Portland, membership of Washington County Cooperative Library Services is currently made up of 12 independently run community and municipal libraries (several with multiple branches), as well as two special libraries. Member libraries are managed locally, where they are best able to focus on meeting the needs of their specific communities. The majority of operating funds come from WCCLS and are supplemented with local funds. In turn, Washington County runs Central Support and Outreach Services, which among other details handles certain shared infrastructure such as courier services, summer reading support, WiFi and Internet, e-content collections, and an integrated library catalog system, as well as outreach services to underserved populations. Through extensive committee work, all agencies and organizations come together to help shape priorities for sharing these crucial resources across the cooperative.



The operating levy, measured at 22 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value, will be factored into the budget for WCCLS beginning with fiscal year 2016–17 and going through fiscal year 2020–21. The goals and priorities our cooperative identified during this period of time are to maintain patron access to core library services, to increase efficiencies in service delivery, to expand e-content collections, and to support early learning opportunities for children and youth. While the breakdown for how funds are distributed gets rather complicated, it is safe to say that levy funds are fundamental to the amount and quality of service that our member libraries are able to provide to their patrons.

Education and Advocacy

Washington County voters had not voted on a library levy measure since 2010. This was at a time when social media efforts were still in a rather burgeoning stage for both WCCLS and its member libraries. Facebook had only rolled out Facebook Pages accounts for businesses, agencies and institutions the prior year (Greenstein, 2009). Instagram was only a few weeks old on Election Day 2010 (Sengupta, Perlroth, & Wortham, 2012), and only 8 percent of online Americans were using Twitter (Smith & Rainie, 2010). Given the much wider rates of adoption for social media users over the last five years, we all knew social media would play a much greater role in voter education in 2015.

It's obvious to most that communications and marketing have seen revolutionary changes in the past 15 years, and much of these efforts rely on social media now more than ever. As a cooperative library system, each member library maintains their own communication and marketing efforts (as does WCCLS itself), which now include dozens of social media channels across the cooperative. In addition, many of these channels are managed by teams at each library, which means that countywide we have a lot of individuals creating content and interacting online with patrons through library social media.

To comply with Oregon election laws, public libraries find themselves in the position of being tasked with providing objective information about levy funding issues without advocating for a particular position. We needed all of our libraries to be careful to avoid any language of advocacy in support of Measure 34-235 while still providing objective information to the voting public, both in person and online. With so many library staff getting involved in social media at their library, we saw a big need and opportunity to address these often fine lines of advocacy and information sharing with fellow staff across the cooperative.

At the county level, we wanted to support and empower our fellow social media managers at our member libraries, giving them training and guidelines to help them feel confident creating content and managing positive patron interactions concerning the levy. Developing a countywide social media content strategy for the first time, WCCLS created and delivered training, sample content and a content calendar [Figure 1] for member library staff to utilize for a seven-week period leading up to the election. As a result, we successfully educated the public about Measure 34-235 via social media, while using supporting messaging to illustrate the great work of our library cooperative.

Our Approach

Starting in the summer of 2015, WCCLS staff utilized Washington County election materials that had been reviewed by the Oregon Secretary of State's Elections Division for compliance with Oregon Revised Statutes. Using vetted language and images as a framework, we




identified several key points on which to focus our voter education efforts through social media. Each week for seven weeks leading up to Election Day, we chose a key message of voter education about the levy to broadcast through simple Facebook and Twitter posts. We came up with very clear guidelines for answering questions and handling comments regarding the levy via social media as well. In addition to this plan, we created a companion campaign which we ran simultaneously over the seven week period. This secondary campaign did not mention the levy explicitly, yet drew attention to each week's informational theme by highlighting appropriate library activities and accomplishments.

In early September, WCCLS Adult Services staff presented a webinar to staff and volunteers at member libraries and the Aloha Community Library on the levy education strategy for social media. The primary focus was to empower frontline staff and those handling library social media accounts with the confidence to provide the public with neutral, educational information regarding Measure 34-235. We stressed the difference between voter education and library advocacy, and our responsibilities as public employees to do so. Through a number of examples, we also demonstrated supporting messages (which did not mention the levy specifically) to use in addition to our levy education messaging.

In addition, WCCLS staff provided our libraries with a detailed social media content calendar, as well as sample posts that they could utilize or share for both levy education and supporting messaging. Our supporting messages were organized around a different theme each week which again helped to reinforce that week's particular levy education points. We

WCCLS Levy & Supporting Messaging Calendar 2015

Week of September 21: Background info			
Type of Post	Twitter text (117 char limit w/ image; 95 w/ image and link)	Facebook text	Image (use the full version from the Extranet)
Levy messaging	Measure 34-235 supports WCCLS library operations, & replaces a 5-year levy expiring June 2016. wccls.org/levy	For 39 years, WCCLS has provided funding for public library operations, central support and outreach programs linking together city and community libraries. Measure 34-235 replaces a 5-year levy expiring June 2016, which provides 1/3 of WCCLS funding. For more information: wccls.org/levy	
Supporting messaging	History & background of the cooperative.		


Week of September 28: Statistics about services - hours, technology, holds, & circ			
Type of Post	Twitter text (117 char limit w/ image; 95 w/ image and link)	Facebook text	Image (use the full version from the Extranet)
Levy messaging	Measure 34-235 maintains WCCLS library hours, shared technology, & courier services. wccls.org/levy	Measure 34-235 provides central and outreach services that link our libraries together. With this levy, WCCLS will maintain daily deliveries of materials between libraries to fill patron requests; maintain the WCCLS website and shared library catalog, and public Internet and WiFi at libraries; provide outreach to special populations such as mail delivery to homebound residents. For more information: wccls.org/levy	
Supporting messaging	WCCLS provides shared resources to improve services at member libraries.		

FIGURE 1: Page 1 of 2015 WCCLS levy and supporting messaging social media content calendar. As you can see, content calendars need not be complicated, and can help organize and focus social media strategies for larger organizations with distributed social media teams.



FIGURE 2: A WCCLS graphic optimized for a Facebook Page cover image, directing patrons to an informational webpage about Measure 34-235, distributed to WCCLS member libraries for use on their own Facebook Pages.

sent weekly reminders to our libraries' social media administrators to maintain the messaging campaign's momentum. Customized graphics to use for cover images [Figure 2] and organic posts to direct viewers to our levy information page on the WCCLS website were used by most member libraries and the Aloha Community Library as well.

Successes

We received a strong level of positive engagement (through likes, comments, retweets, and face-to-face comments) from our patrons and communities, all of which helped extend our messaging beyond our regular followers. Member libraries reported that the content calendar, and the regular support and encouragement that WCCLS provided, helped them maintain focus and momentum with their own social media efforts. When pressed for time, member libraries were able to simply copy and paste or share our prepared content for their own social media accounts which proved to be beneficial. Alternately, our member libraries were able to tailor each week's theme as needed locally, in order to speak more directly to their local patrons and supporters.

Another positive outcome of our levy education effort was that WCCLS was approached by EveryLibrary (www.everylibrary.org), a nonprofit that assists with local library ballot measures across the U.S., to use our content calendar and documents as samples of best practices. Most importantly, however, our member libraries have expressed how beneficial this collaborative effort was in helping them deftly navigate the election season.

Thanks!

From a purely numbers-based standpoint, our best social media engagement came immediately after polls closed on Election Night, November 3, 2015, when it was clear that Washington County voters had chosen to approve the levy. We were able to report early results on Facebook and Twitter that evening, and the following morning we broadcast a message of thanks on social media to all of our followers.

To date, these 'thank you' posts remain some of our most popular since WCCLS first began using social media. Using a simply designed graphic [Figure 3] that we encouraged member libraries to share and post, we received overwhelming goodwill and support from our communities and patrons via social media throughout the rest of week following the election. 🐾



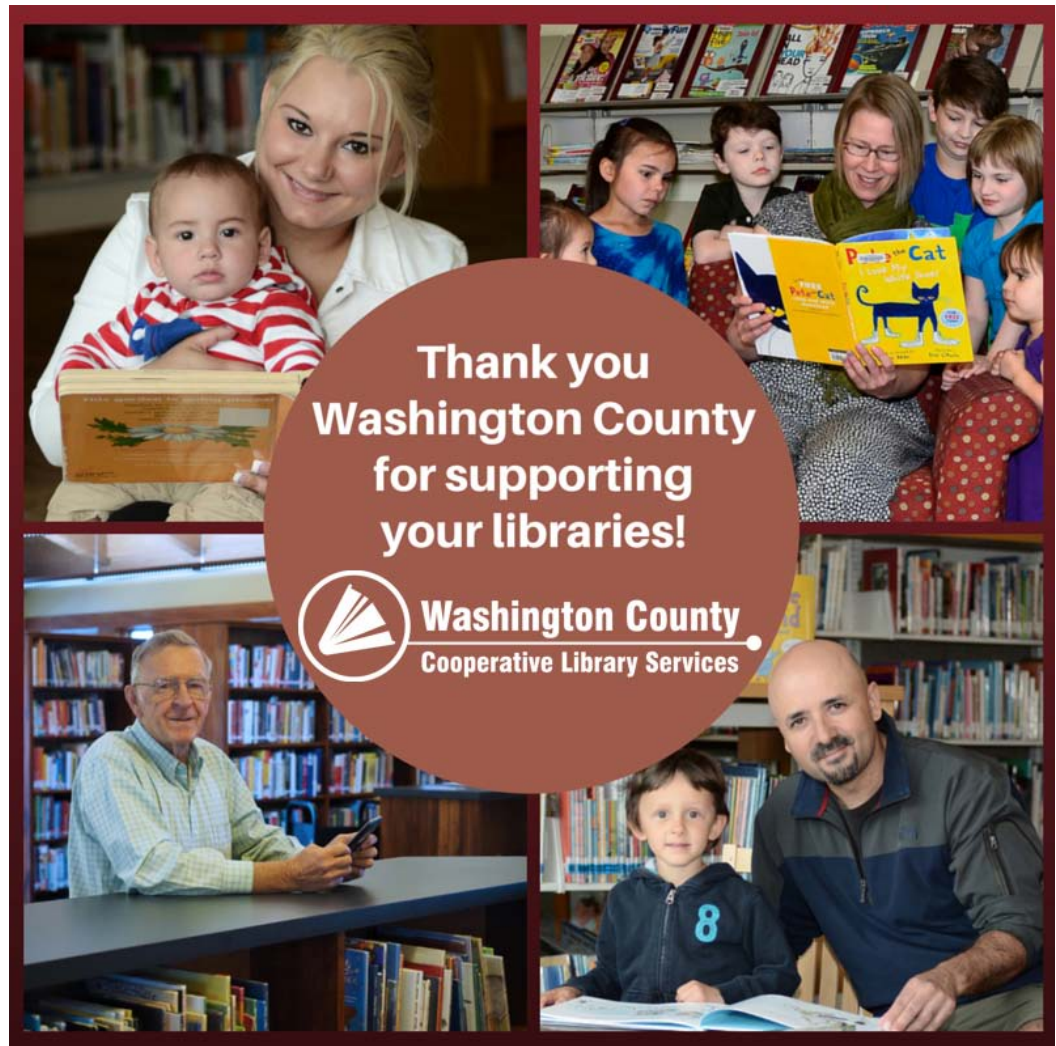


FIGURE 3: A WCCLS graphic optimized for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter thanking followers for their support on Measure 34-235, distributed to and shared by WCCLS member libraries following the 2015 election.

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